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EPA releases insulation warning

Agency launches national campaign

Special to the Inter Lake

LIBBY — The federal government has launched a national campaign to alert homeowners to the potential dangers of asbestos-contaminated vermiculite attic insulation.

The campaign, coordinated by the Environmental Protection Agency and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, instructs homeowners on how to identify vermiculite attic insulation and warns people not to disturb it.

"The government believes that people should be aware that some vermiculite attic insulation can contain microscopic asbestos fibers, and there are practical steps that homeowners can take to mini-

mize exposure," said Stephen L. Johnson, EPA's assistant administrator for the Office of Prevention, Pesticides and Toxic Substances.

Most vermiculite insulation in homes is Zonolite Attic Insulation, once mined by W.R. Grace near Libby.

Since November 1999, the EPA has been investigating the toxicity of the insulation and removing it from area homes.

In health screenings, about 1,500 of just over 7,000 Libby-area residents showed signs of asbestos-related disease.

Because of dozens of pathways to exposure, the federal government decided to remove the insulation from Libby homes, something the EPA had not done before.

An estimated 15 million homes and buildings in the United States contain the insulation.

"People who have homes with vermiculite attic insulation should become informed,

not alarmed," Johnson said. "By using the information in this campaign, people can determine if their home contains vermiculite attic insulation and learn how to properly manage it.

"Well-informed consumers can reduce the possibility for exposure to asbestos from vermiculite attic insulation and minimize potential risks."

The key recommendations are:

- Homeowners should not disturb vermiculite attic insulation. Any disturbance has the potential to release asbestos fibers into the air.

- If homeowners must go into attic space with vermiculite insulation, they should limit the number, duration and activity level of these trips.

- Boxes or other items should not be stored in attics if retrieving them will disturb the insulation.

- Children should not be allowed to play in an attic with

open areas of vermiculite insulation.

- Homeowners should never attempt to remove vermiculite insulation. If removal is necessary, hire professionals trained and certified to safely remove the material.

- Homeowners planning renovations that would disturb vermiculite insulation also are advised to hire trained professionals.

There is no easy way or dependable testing method to determine whether vermiculite insulation has asbestos fibers or not. It is best to assume that the material may contain asbestos and take appropriate precautions.

The new campaign includes nationwide distribution of a pamphlet that outlines how to identify and manage vermiculite.

Information is also available to consumers on EPA's Web site, www.epa.gov/asbestos or by calling a special hotline, 1-800-471-7127.